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Use and Study of Sign Language in Ukraine : History of Research.

In Ukraine sign language has been in existence for more than two centuries. It made its first appearance in the early communities of the deaf, as well as in special schools for deaf children. These were the Lviv School for Deaf Children that opened in 1830, and one in Odesa that opened in 1843. Sign language, as Yuri Kramar justly notes, developed and was cultivated in families of the deaf from generation to generation. This is a unique communicative creation of people who have no opportunity to communicate orally. It is also an example of their creativity and the belief that a person with hearing loss is both able and actively creates his or her native language.

This understanding, however, came very late. A great deal of time passed before sign language was acknowledged at all, and during its history it was viewed from highly polarized positions.

In spite of a prevailing “pure oral approach” which dominated deaf education at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, history does remember the views of famous teachers of the deaf on the use of sign language in the teaching process. The first deaf educators who worked on the territory of Ukraine were Mykola Lahovsky, Ivan Sokolyansky, Leo Vygotsky, Rakhil Boskis, Rudolf Krayevsky, and others. Theoretically, Mykola Lahovsky did not treat the oral approach as the only possible method in the process of deaf education. Nor did other professional educators of the deaf neglect the language of signs.

Specifically M. Lahovsky stated: “The gesticulation and unconditional facial expressions that are naturally used by students in their communication with each other, are even harmful to suppress and eradicate because there is an opportunity for junior students who are not able to talk yet to learn it from

senior students and in this way to develop it. Instead of severely prosecuting gesticulation, there should be undertaken measures which promote acquisition of speech and do not slow down students' mental development..."

Various honorable meetings brought up discussions on varied problems in the education of hearing impaired people. For instance, in 1910 Ivan Sokolyansky, at that time a teacher of Oleksandriv's school for the deaf and mute, prepared a report "On Teaching the Ukrainian Deaf and Mute Their Native Language" for the All-Russian Congress of Teachers of the Deaf and Mute. In his report he argued the pedagogical necessity of teaching Ukrainian students the Ukrainian language in spite of the then-existing law that forbade teaching in Ukrainian.

It is interesting to note that, as a teacher of the deaf, Sokolyansky felt great disappointment and pedagogical frustration due to the prevailing oral approach used in schools. He noticed that the rate of success among deaf students was very poor. He understood that theory and practice of deaf education greatly differed from one another. Reading books on linguistics, he became interested in the views of L. Shcherba, who placed great importance on sign language in the development of the deaf. L. Shcherba compared deaf people with foreigners who use their own language, yet whose "facial expressions" are a kind of a language system which teachers should know and which they should learn. It is necessary to point out that Shcherba confined himself to the grammatical approach of learning and teaching a foreign language (i.e. for a deaf person, oral language is foreign). It is for this reason that when summing up his scientific views, Shcherba pointed out that "in the course of teaching oral speech to the deaf and mute, their native language – "facial" (sign language) must be used in full scale".

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s Sokolyansky used Shcherba's views as a foundation for his work on the problem of speech policy in schools for the deaf. He was firmly convinced that a teacher who is in the presence of a deaf child should communicate using the language understandable by that child. He thus asked himself the obvious question of what language this should be. There were a few possibilities with the principal ones being a

combination of sign, signed language and oral speech, or strictly signs and fingerspelling. It was his opinion that only visual language could substitute intonation of oral speech for hearing impaired children.

Ivan Sokolyansky did not put into practice his approaches and ideas on deaf education, although he did so in the education of the blind and deaf. He also failed to prove the necessity of the sign language phase in the early stages of language teaching. Not long before his death, he wrote, “I have come to a firm and final conclusion that ignoring the sign language of a deaf child in the pre-school and school period is a serious crime that must be prosecuted.”

Soon after, the 1938 All-Russian Meeting of Teachers of the Deaf, determined that the primary means of communication during teaching was via the oral and written language, with signed (starting from grade 3) and sign language given supporting roles.

In late 1930s Soviet teachers of the deaf Rakhil' Boskis and Natalia Morozova made an attempt to research sign language experimentally. They failed, however, to create a linguistic description of the language. Traditional methods of linguistics were ineffective for the analysis of the language of signs because they operated with such notions as parts of speech, members of sentences, etc. There was nothing of the kind in sign language. As a result, poor conclusions were derived. It was thought that since sign language did not have grammatical rules that it must be very primitive. In addition to this it was considered that the deaf could not use two languages and after the gradual acquisition of oral speech, sign language would be reduced to signed speech.

Leo Vygotsky, an outstanding psychologist of the 20th century and a scientist of great learning, defined sign language not as a kinetic model of oral speech, but as *a symbolic system* with its own structure and peculiarities. It was not given to people biologically, but developed because of the social environment in response to a demand to communicate: first with parents, then with tutors, peers, classmates, teachers, and colleagues at work. Only qualitative integration into the life of society makes it possible

for deaf children to develop good cognitive skills. It could therefore be concluded that sign language is by no means primitive.

Mr. Vygotsky stated “The struggle of oral speech with visual language, in spite of all the good intentions of the teachers, as a rule, always brings about a victory for the latter. And it happened not only because sign language, from a psychological point of view, is a genuine language of the deaf-mutes, nor because it is easier to learn. The reason is that sign language is their *true speech with all its richness of functional meanings*. Oral speech is artificial to them and only served to reduce the variety of life. The result is a dead print from the live language.”

He strongly recommended teachers of the deaf use the full potential of a deaf child without showing their ill will towards sign language. They should try to understand that different forms of speech can be more than just competitors, but also stages with the help of which a deaf child would gradually acquire speaking skills.

Joseph Stalin’s article “Marxism and Linguistics Problems” produced a strong negative influence on the use of sign language in the teaching process of special schools. In the article he alleged that deaf-mutes were “abnormal, dumb” people, and their “hand” language was not “a language at all, not even an ersatz language”. He claimed it could not be compared with sound-based languages, as it was not possible to compare “a primitive hoe with a modern caterpillar tractor driving a five-share plough”. “Thanks” to such allegations sign language was eradicated from the teaching process of special schools for the deaf for many decades.

In 1968, at the initiative of the Ukrainian Deaf Association (at the time it numbered 57,000 people), Natalia Ivanyusheva, a very experienced interpreter and teacher of the deaf, developed a manual called “Signed Speech” for interpreters, beginners and teachers of the deaf. Materials in the book were organized according to the principle of a growing notion that people studying sign language would first master the simplest concepts, learn the most commonly used signs, and then enlarge their vocabulary with political, industrial, and agricultural terminologies. Signs were topically

arranged, and a photo was added together with a detailed description of the sign.

The early 1960s brought new research by R. Krayevsky, a teacher of the Drahomanov Pedagogical University (then named after M. Gorky), who linguistically described sign language using Ukrainian materials as a basis. He believed that sign language consisted of expressive movements (facial expressions and gestures) and gesture signs (direct concrete symbols, indirect symbols, artificial signs).

Mr. Krayevsky built on the theoretical characteristics of the language of the deaf, adding to it a unique dictionary where he grouped lexemes according to the *configuration* (shape) of the hand – one of the basic components of a sign as a semantic unit. Two other components – space position of a hand (hands) and its (their) movements – were also described in detail.

On the other side of the planet, American William Stokoe, a researcher of American Sign Language, proved that sign language is a multilevel linguistic system which possesses a great variety of lexical and grammatical means to express thoughts and analyze information, and a sign is a basic meaningful (semantic) unit with a complex structure.

He compared the components of a sign (hand shape, positioning, and movement) with the phonemes of a word and in detail described and analyzed them. The research of W. Stokoe launched the appearance of “structural linguistics” which made it possible to scientifically study the sign language of the deaf. With this in mind, we can proudly state that the work of R. Krayevsky is an important contribution of Ukrainian scholarly work as the first attempt to study USL.

The 1970s and 1980s in Ukraine were characterized as a period of inactivity, whereas the rest of the scientific world, having acknowledged sign language as a highly developed communication system, worked on problems of thinking, cognitive activity and socialization in relation to this language of the deaf. The results of their research brought about the

appearance of a new approach. Specifically, it led to the principle that sign language is one of mankind's natural languages, no better or worse than any other oral language, despite differing greatly in its linguistic structure and substance. Moreover, any thinking about "dumb deaf-mutes" has become viewed as tactless. Thus, we do not want to deny the role of oral language in the development of deaf children. We want only to dispute the monopoly of oral language, in place of which sign language can be used.

Foreign psychological and psycholinguistic researchers have studied the developmental peculiarities of deaf children brought up in fully deaf families. They found that full-scale communication in sign language allowed them to surpass their peers from families with hearing parents. Children from deaf families learn to communicate visually in the same way as hearing children learn to use oral language (i.e. there is a correspondence in the parameters of the first use of words and signs, their functions, character of mistakes). The American researcher D. Moores pointed out the great successes deaf children from deaf families have in mastering school programs. Subjects included English grammar, higher levels of reading skills, communicative talents, socialization, etc. Moreover, Moores emphasized that there was not a single experiment tried during which such deaf children displayed any retardation in the development of oral speech.

The early 1990s were marked by neuropsychological research of U. Bellugi and E. Klima on the mechanisms of sign language. They proved via experimentation that the brain activity mechanisms that provide function for both oral and sign languages are actually organized according to the same principles. The brain's left hemisphere, the area that is dominant in organizing neurophysiological processes of oral language production, is also involved in the production of sign language. It is this left-hemisphere localization of sign language that identifies its high level of development as a sign system and its important role in cognitive activities of the deaf.

According to resolutions of the International Congress of the World Deaf Association, and conferences on teaching of the deaf, modern day pedagogy has included sign language into the system of deaf education.

Prominent teachers of the deaf, including Galina Zaytseva, Doctor of Pedagogy and Director of the Moscow Bilingual Gymnasium, are sure that

the existing, traditional system of deaf education is unable to provide equal educational and development opportunities to all deaf persons. The main drawback of this system is its unitarian approach. Its methodology is based on the belief that only oral language can serve as a possible foundation to develop the personality of the deaf persons. Supporters of bilingual education believe that for the majority of the deaf, the most positive pedagogical system is using the oral and sign language environment together as equal means in the process of educating deaf children. This is the bilingual approach and uses native sign language “spoken” by deaf adults.

Increasingly, Ukrainian experts are focusing upon research on: the study of national sign languages throughout the world, their introduction into the teaching processes, use of sign language as the first language of a deaf child, development of curricula and textbooks, empowering the deaf with rights on receiving information and education in sign language, and granting official state status to sign language. During the last 4 years we have witnessed a great deal of activity on this question by the Ukraine-Canada Alliance for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Persons (UCA), the non-governmental organization that unites professionals, teachers, parents, and others who work directly with deaf children.

Cooperation with Canadian colleagues makes it possible to exchange information on various matters. During several previous years, the Ukraine-Canada Alliance has organized summer Institutes in special schools for hearing impaired children in different regions of Ukraine. The goals of the summer Institutes are aimed at creating opportunities for active collaboration among students, teachers and parents, to recognize students’ potential and improve communication.

It was the initiative of active UCA participants that raised the need for linguistic research of Ukrainian sign language and its inclusion into the teaching process of schools for the deaf. This idea is actively supported by the Association of Deaf Teachers in Ukraine which launched its activity in February, 2003.

The goals of this organization are promoting the teaching process, improving the quality of education, establishing close contacts between students and teachers, in order to help deaf students realize their full potential.

These events were preceded by passing resolutions at two scientific conferences held on the initiative of the Ukrainian Deaf Association. Specifically the resolutions of the First All-Ukrainian Conference on the History of Deaf Education in Ukraine (2000) and the First All-Ukrainian Conference on Social Rehabilitation of the Deaf (2002), which set as a goal the introduction of sign language into the teaching process of schools for the deaf.

The same idea was supported by the results of the survey “Sign Language as a Teaching Method of the Deaf” carried to the readers of the newspaper “Our Life”, a publication of UDA. A total of 937 persons took part in the survey, 709 of them deaf and hard-of-hearing. The vast majority of respondents (923) responded that Ukrainian Sign Language should be introduced not only into the teaching process of special schools, but also studied as the native language of the deaf.

It is also very important to point out that the use of sign language in education has brought about the development of new materials. Some examples include:

- the Ukrainian thematic video dictionary of USL developed by Natalia Ivanyusheva and Yevdokia Zuyeva that includes 1,800 signs thematically organized and is considered to be a fundamental dictionary for mastering the native language of the deaf;
- the textbook “From A to Z” on finger spelling and sign language for special schools which can be used by parents and students of pedagogical universities (authors Nadia Kozachek, Kateryna Vasylyeva) – Kharkiv State Pedagogical University;
- a 4-year curriculum of the USL for schools of the deaf developed by Yevgenia Gryshchenko and Vasyl’ Styopkin;
- an article by Svitlana Kul’bida on the present state of Ukrainian Dactylology (journal Defectology , 2003);

- weekly presentations of USL signs published in the newspaper “Our Life” which represent standards and culture of USL.

Although such materials are very important, the general problem of advancing deaf education can only be solved through united actions by researchers, education practitioners and interpreters. Specifically:

- the organization of a study of cultural sign language by teachers of the deaf, students of pedagogical universities and parents of deaf children;
- a linguistic study of the features of Ukrainian Sign Language;
- development of contents, goals, methodologies, curricula, teaching materials, and legislative documents on the introduction of USL into the teaching process on an equal level with spoken Ukrainian and as a form of communication for inter-subject relations;
- publication of USL textbooks;
- revision and reorganization of the course “Dactylology and Sign Language” taught in certain education faculties of pedagogical universities by involving qualified specialists.

We hope that this discussion of the problem will lead to the start of serious measures being undertaken to solve the issues mentioned above.